

FRENCH CREEK I PROJECT

PROPOSED ACTION

Proposed Project Location the French Creek I project area is located ~ 10 miles north of Berry Creek, CA at elevations ranging between 2,300 and 4,500 feet. Annual precipitation ranges between 55 and 70 inches. Most of the area is comprised of Sierra mixed conifer consisting of white fir, Douglas-fir, ponderosa pine, sugar pine, incense cedar, red fir, California black oak, big leaf maple, tan oak, and Pacific madrone. Most of the lower elevation stands and south facing slopes are pine dominated mixed conifer while higher elevation stands and north facing slopes are mostly fir dominated mixed conifer. Pine species are mostly restricted to the overstory with limited regeneration due to overcrowding by white fir and in some cases, Douglas-fir.

The Camp Fire (November 8-25, 2018) burned through a majority of the proposed project acres but mostly at low severity. Moderate and high severity acres were removed from the French Creek project and are currently being salvage logged with the Big Bar project.

Proposed Action the French Creek I project proposes to reduce hazardous fuels and stand density through commercial and pre-commercial thinning, mastication of brush and prescribed burning. Ponderosa pine plantations will be thinned to low densities emphasizing stand and species variability. Mixed conifer stands will be thinned but retain relatively higher stocking, especially in California spotted owl habitat, but emphasize density reduction in overstocked groups of ponderosa pine, California black oak release, a reduction in shade tolerant tree species, and removing smaller diameter trees from the understory. Residual stands will be more open, increasing the amount of available soil moisture and sunlight for individual trees and reducing the risk of high severity wildfire. We will treat no more than 3,000 acres by:

- Mechanical thinning in pine dominated mixed conifer commercial thinning to remove sawlog-sized trees ranging from 10.0 to 30.0 inches dbh limit, to reduce stand density, reducing competition for limited soil moisture. Thin using GTR 220 concepts to result in no more than 30% reduction in canopy cover averaged across stands. In California spotted owl (CSO) home range core areas (HRCA) retain a minimum 50% canopy cover. In northern goshawk protected activity centers (PAC) design treatments to maintain habitat structure and function. Maintain a limited operating period;
- Mechanical thinning in pine dominated mixed conifer (special) the grove of large diameter white pine blister rust infected sugar pine with older top-kill observed in the project area appear to be relatively healthy. However, a few individuals are growing in suppressed crown positions, or have a low live crown ratio, and should be candidates for removal during the thinning operation. Thinning in this stand should attempt to create a more heterogeneous species composition by retaining other species as much as possible;
- Mechanical thinning in fir dominated mixed conifer commercial thinning to remove sawlog-sized trees ranging from 10.0 to 30.0 inches dbh limit. Variable density thin using GTR 220 concepts to target true fir, leaving ponderosa, Jeffrey, and sugar pine, some

incense cedar, and release California black oak and other canopy providing hard woods. Various sized openings can be created in the stand by removing severely infected trees to facilitate planting of non-hosts such as ponderosa and sugar pine. In CSO HRCA retain a minimum 50% canopy cover. In PAC design to maintain habitat structure and function. Maintain a limited operating period;

- Plantation thinning inside mechanical thinning stands are pole to small tree-sized plantations that are not suitable owl or goshawk habitat. Thin plantations to about 60-120 square feet/acre basal area emphasizing stand variability;
- Roadside hazard along roadsides in mechanical thinning and service stands remove dead or dying trees, dead parts of live trees, or unstable trees that are likely to fail in the near future and are within striking distance of people, facilities, or roads, following "Hazard tree guidelines for Forest Service facilities and roads in the Pacific Southwest". In PAC, hazard tree removal will be restricted to failure potential 4 (tree is dead) and 3 (high potential for failure). No sawlog diameter limits for hazard tree removal;
- Sub-merchantable biomass trees material may be treated by biomass to landing (unless a market for chips is identified) or follow up hand cut hand pile and burn, hand cut grapple pile and burn, mastication, or under-burning treatments;
- Service work use hand cut pile and burn, hand cut grapple pile and burn, mastication, or targeted grazing as needed where prescribed fire is not feasible or is not feasible without preparation treatments;
- Prescribed fire prioritize acres for burning and design treatments that maximize the use of fire to achieve desired conditions;
- Maintenance hand cutting, hand- and/or grapple-piling, mastication, targeted grazing, and prescribed under-burning as needed on multiple entries over the next 25 to 30 years to maintain desired conditions; and
- The project will include road improvements and maintenance.

Mechanical treatments in northern goshawk PAC would require a non-significant amendment to the Forest Plan.

During project layout we will look for areas (landings, road maintenance, areas of 100% tree mortality) with the potential for development of pullouts and roadside parking to facilitate dispersed recreation opportunities.

Purpose of Action most of the forested areas in the French Creek project area are in an overstocked condition and some experienced an elevated level of tree mortality caused by bark beetles during the recent drought from 2014 to 2016. In addition to being overly dense, these areas have a history of tree mortality during drought resulting in heavy fuel loads and higher risk of stand replacing wildfire. Thinning and prescribed fire are highly recommended throughout the project area to reduce tree density and surface and ladder fuels levels.

Need for Action section 605 of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 (HFRA) establishes a categorical exclusion for hazardous fuels reduction projects on National Forest System lands. A hazardous fuels reduction project may be categorically excluded under this authority that is

designed to maximize the retention of large trees, to the extent that the trees promote stands that are resilient to insects and disease, and reduce the risk or extent of, or increase the resilience to, wildfires.

Collaborative Development Process on May 9, 2019, 10 representatives of local government, environmental organizations, industry, and the Forest Service visited the project area as part of a field trip of the Feather River Ranger District (FRRD) Collaborative to tour National Forest System lands in the Camp Fire area. The project was introduced at the field trip site and later that evening at the quarterly meeting of the FRRD Collaborative.

The Butte County Forest Advisory Committee was briefed on the project May 20, 2019 at their monthly meeting.

The FRRD interdisciplinary team (IDT) met May 29, 2019, along with collaborators representing Butte County Fire Safe Council, Butte County Forest Advisory Committee, Sierra Forest Legacy, and Sierra Pacific Industries to approve a project area and propose stand-by-stand prescriptions. At this meeting it was also proposed to look for opportunities to facilitate dispersed recreation opportunities.